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Considerations on Genuine Synesthesia in Art and Music

Considérations sur la véritable synesthésie dans l'art et la musique

Greta Berman

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Considerations on Genuine Synesthesia in Art and Music

Considérations sur la véritable synesthésie dans l'art et la musique

Greta Berman

OUTLINE

Investigation on shared characteristics of synesthetic art

Investigation on Joyce Yang's synesthetic case

TEXT

- 1 In this essay, I shall focus on the phenomenon of genuine synesthesia. In so doing, I have pointed to a number of traits that are often shared among synesthetic visual artists, as well as among synesthetic composers and performing musicians.
- 2 The synesthesia field has been rife with misunderstandings, both my own, and those of others. Though ever-increasing numbers of exhibitions, books, and articles have used the title or subtitle, "Synesthesia in art and/or music", few of these adequately define synesthesia. Indeed, some fail to address the issue at all. The major cause of the problem is that art and music historians and curators, as well as artists and composers themselves, have confused the desire to intermingle various art forms with the phenomenon of genuine synesthesia. I myself originally came to the study of synesthesia through my twin passions for music and the visual arts, and from the point of view of an art historian. This essay is an attempt to look specifically at shared characteristics among genuine synesthetic artists, for we must distinguish between synesthesia as an art program (which I have been calling metaphorical synesthesia) and synesthesia as a physiological diagnosis (or constitutional synesthesia).
- 3 A number of exhibitions in recent years have used the word "synesthesia" in their title, but the show Carol Steen and I curated, "Synesthesia: Art and the Mind", at McMaster University Museum in 2008 is the only one of its kind—as far as I have been able

to determine—that deals uniquely with genuinely synesthetic artists, and illustrates what they might have in common. In organizing the exhibition, we asked the following questions:

- 4 Do synesthetic artists experience common shapes, colors or ways of seeing? Are synesthetic artists consciously using their visions to create their work, or are they aware of doing this? How do synesthetic artists employ their synesthesia to make art?
- 5 The artists we presented in our show included known synesthetes David Hockney, Joan Mitchell, Marcia Smilack and Carol Steen. But we also embraced works by Vincent van Gogh, Wassily Kandinsky, Tom Thomson, and Charles Burchfield, artists whom we have reason to believe were synesthetic, although we cannot prove it as we can with living artists. I will briefly compare and contrast the work of three known contemporary synesthetic artists with some shown in other “synesthetic” exhibitions, such as Paul Klee and some more recent artists who consciously manipulate digital media in order to create what they call synesthetic effects). In doing so, I shall focus on some shared traits among genuinely synesthetic painters and musicians.
- 6 The difference between genuinely synesthetic artists and those who attempt to create synesthetic images for the viewer/listener is that the synesthetes portray a real (to them) vision, sensation, etc. But the re-creators of images attempt to create a reaction of synesthesia in the observer. However, synesthesia is not something one can passively observe. In order to be genuine, it has to happen to someone. Otherwise it is at best, a recreation, at worst, a stale rehashing, contrived, and ineffective.
- 7 Synesthetic colors are specific and nuanced—not simple hues, not delineated; not hard-edged. This is also true in music. Synesthetic music is like synesthetic art; it is characterized by complexity, depth, perspective, no hard edges, lots of texture, and layering. Digital manipulations in both art and music are flatter, more decorative, and have less depth. They often use hard edges, and are somewhat like one-liners. Ultimately, they tend to be too smooth and easy, sometimes even boring.

Investigation on shared characteristics of synesthetic art

- 8 Perhaps one problem is that synesthesia has long been considered difficult, if not impossible to study, because of its idiosyncratic nature. There is no question that individual synesthetes experience colored sounds, colored letters, or textures of music in varying ways. However, the investigation Carol Steen and I made into the artistic work and recorded statements of numerous synesthetic artists clearly shows the existence of recurrent patterns of artistic response to synesthetic experience. This discovery helps us to better understand the entire synesthetic phenomenon: we hoped to demonstrate this visually in our 2008 exhibition.
- 9 Much of this goes back to the 1920s, when two distinguished scientists, Georg Anschutz, (1886–1953), and Heinrich Klüver (1897–1979), pioneered studies about synesthetes and synesthesia. Their research aids us today in the recognition of recurrent elements in art works. Klüver identified “form constants” including zigzag lines, grids, repeated small circles or pinprick dots, broken and parallel lines, irregular starbursts, and specific, slightly amorphous cloud shapes. These shapes can also move, radiate, and repeat, but are usually not symmetrical or precise. I would add to the (black and white) list of shared patterns of perception and expression the use of a multiplicity of shades and hues of color that are highly individual to each synesthete.¹
- 10 Often among synesthetic painters, a calligraphic element can be found. For Chinese calligraphers, the brush is considered an extension of the mind. Although nature is their source, artists slavishly copying nature are thought to lack creativity. Therefore, much of Chinese critical theory encourages calligraphic artists to draw inspiration from nature, but then allow their imagination free rein. This nature-based theory in the broad sense is called “artistic synesthesia” (Ouyang et al., 2008, p. 419). Established rules govern stillness versus motion in calligraphic art. Only by associating ideas with observations can one “transform artistic synesthesia into calligraphic beauty” (ibid.). Synesthetic artists frequently employ a set of forms that make up a distinctive synesthetic calligraphic vocabulary. This

vocabulary includes the Klüver constants and other recurrent features.

Figure 1. – Marcia Smilack, *Cello Music*, 1993.



- 11 Works by Marcia Smilack and Carol Steen are illustrative in this regard. Smilack uses a camera to instantaneously capture what she calls the brushstrokes of the wind—which she says she feels on her skin. *Can Can* or *Telephone Ring*, comes uncannily close to Klüver’s form constants in the repeated rotating motions of the (real) harbor lights she saw reflected at night at Oak Bluffs, Martha’s Vineyard. She now recognizes the form constants in this and in *Cello Music*, but was unaware of their presence when she took the photo. She simply snapped the shutter upon hearing cello music—in her “peripheral vision”, and “feeling the water wrinkled”.

Figure 2. – Carol Steen, *Clouds Rise Up*, 2004–2005.



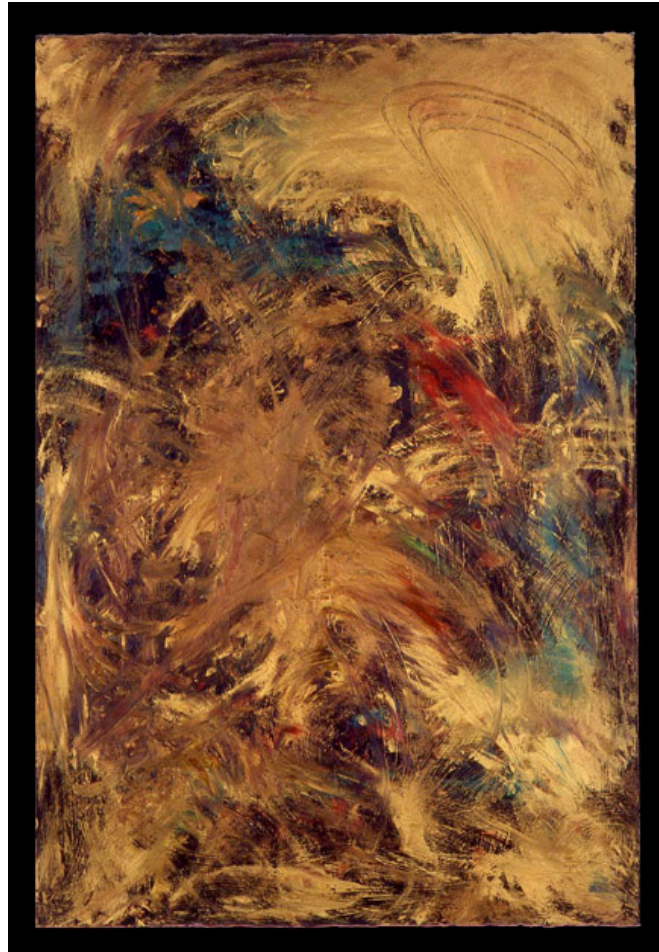
Oil on masonite covered canvas, 62.5 x 51 cm.

Collection of the artist.

- 12 Steen's *Analogy to Autumn* (2006), also demonstrates form constants; the repeated motion of the curving whiplash lines, together with quickly laid down, thick impastos of paint, produce a three-dimensional effect. *Runs off in Front, Gold* (2003) rushes along like autumn leaves caught in eddies of wind; and the universe she creates contains multiple layers, through which she scraped with her fingernails parallel arcs of black lines like those identified in Klüver. Steen, in an ecstatic dance, rapidly applies oil paint to the canvas with her hands, trying to capture the ephemeral colored sounds before they disappear. This and *Clouds Rise Up* (2004–2005) stem from her hearing specific music. The red-orange strokes (which she calls sounds) strongly resemble Chinese calligraphy. Both Steen and

Smilack hurry to catch the synesthetic photisms before they disappear.

Figure 3. – Carol Steen, *Runs off in the Front, Gold*, 2003.



Oil on Paper, 104 x 71 cm.

Collection of the artist.

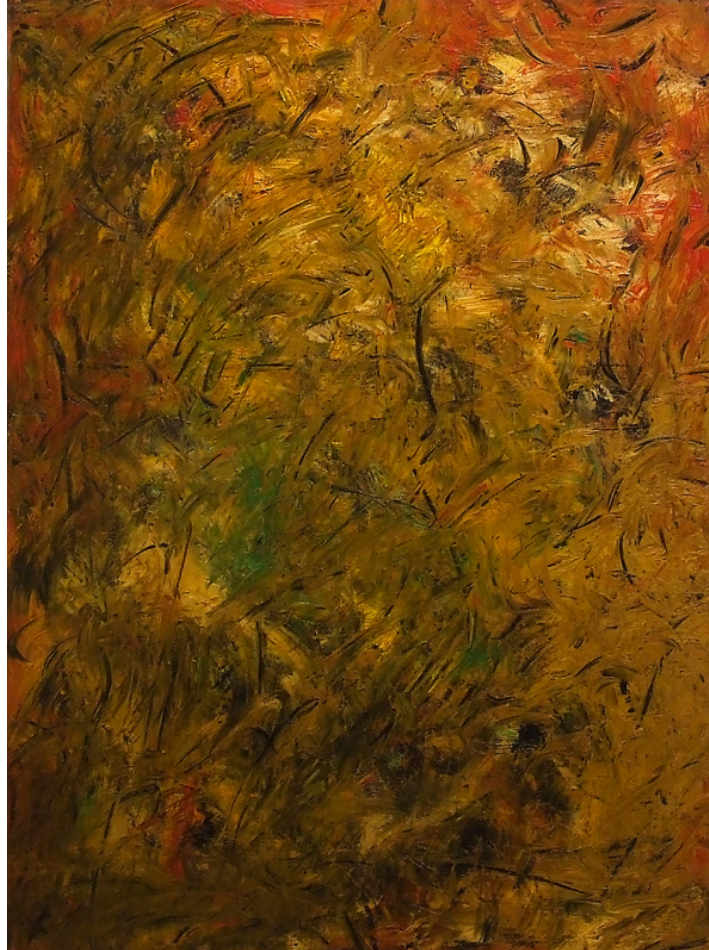
- 13 Joan Mitchell (1925–1992) in her quests for light, layering, time, transience, and movement, intentionally scribbles, scratches, paints, and drips. She derives many of her paintings from memories of her feelings about nature—akin to calligraphers. A composer friend commented that for Mitchell “painting is like music—it is beyond life and death. It is another dimension” (G. Barreau, cited by Livingston, 2002, p. 63). Her paintings have many colors, wavy, squiggly, calligraphic lines, shapes, auras, movement, and layering. *Blue Territory* (1972), for example, is large (8’7” x 5’11”), and painted in

mid-career. The block-like, but irregular arrangement of shapes suggests reality, but remains mysterious.

- 14 David Hockney (b. 1937) has revealed his “color hearing” especially in his set designs for theater and opera. Although he does not read music, he feels that the sets must be “true to the music”. He also shares many characteristics with other known synesthetes, including his basic form vocabulary (puffy clouds, bulky tree shapes, wavy lines, and ripples), his conflation of figure and abstraction, of dream and reality, of ambiguity, and constantly shifting meanings. The large red-orange tree trunks and scattered boughs in his design for the garden for Poulenc’s *Enfant et les Sortilèges* (1980) reveal Klüver form constants. They contrast with the blue complementary color of the leaves and sky, and small pink pinpricks stick out from blue shadows in the green grass. Oscillation, layering, and sound are evoked. In the opera, the anthropomorphic tree scolds the boy for carving initials into it. The “Moonlit Garden” from *The Magic Flute* (1977) is bathed in blue-green, with repeated tree lines and soft clouds. “Trial by Fire”, also from *Magic Flute* (1977) is fiery red-orange, with several hues contained within, as well as numerous repeated zigzagging points, contrasted with the stormy, grey clouds.
- 15 We cannot prove that artists no longer living were synesthetic. However, some, such as Charles Burchfield (1893–1967), have left behind writings that provide a persuasive basis for interpreting their synesthetic attributes. Burchfield’s journals clearly illustrate the perceptual impulses that led him to employ the squiggles, dots and dashes (among other Klüver form constants) to represent such themes as insect song. On March 17, 1915, Burchfield wrote: “Noon is powerful—wind-whirled clouds dancing across a roaring sun... The sunlight was so intense that I seemed conscious of a noise going on outside as of a weird singing shriek.” On July 26, 1915, he wrote “It seems at times I should be a composer of *sounds*, [Italics in original] not only of rhythms and colors.” And again on Oct. 15, “Walking under the trees, I felt as if the color made sound...” Later in life, when recordings became available, he especially loved the music of Sibelius. On Nov. 23, 1938, he notes parallels in his and Sibelius’ careers, saying it is “Interesting to know that as a young man, he saw tones in terms of colors.” On Dec. 18, 1963, he noted that he made two record albums

for Mozart “—made the backs yellow, because it seems to me his music is symbolized by that color.”²

Figure 4. – Carol Steen, *Analogy to Autumn*, 2006.



Oil on Paper, 76 x 55 cm.

Private collection.

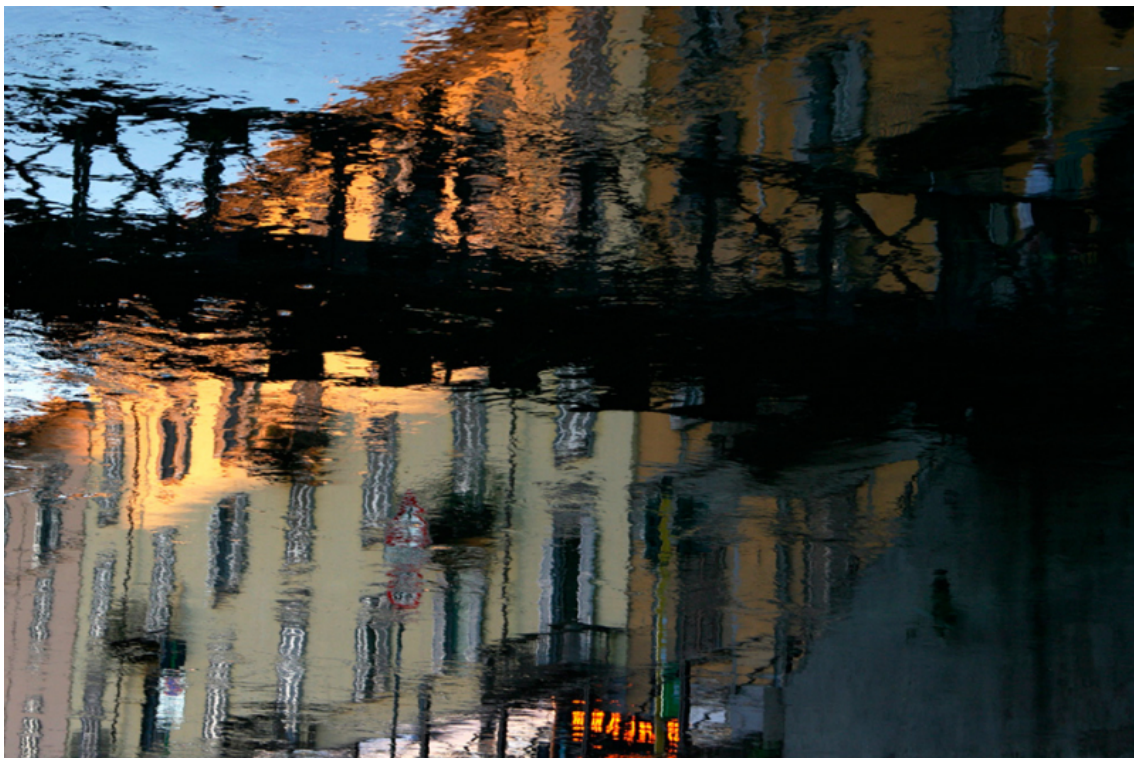
- 16 We will also never know for sure whether Tom Thomson (1877–1917) was a genuine synesthete, even though his work seems so “familiar” to Marcia Smilack and Carol Steen. The thick, impassioned brushstrokes he uses in *Bushes, Late Autumn* (1914) come close to those in Steen’s *Analogy to Autumn*. Like acknowledged synesthetes, he evinces ecstasy before nature, conveying a sense of movement and layering. His work falls somewhere on the margin between figuration and abstraction; his vocabulary of shapes resembles the Klüver form constants. One writer says, “It would not surprise me to find that Thomson has eaten some paint in sheer love of its completeness and

tactile affinity to the tumult of colour around him..." (H. Town, cited by Silcox, 2006, p. 213).

- 17 Two other artists who seem to fit the synesthetic paradigm, Van Gogh and Kandinsky, both wrote extensively about colored music. An often-recounted story tells how Van Gogh maddened his music teacher by stubbornly testing his ideas on color-tone correspondences during piano lessons. Kandinsky's lithographs and paintings often contain overlapping layers of reds and blues; they seem to move around and dance, evoke auras, shimmer, glow, and play with black repeated line fragments. Even an early and transitional Van Gogh painting that we were able to obtain for our 2008 exhibition contains quivering separate brushstrokes of multifaceted hues—looking forward to his mature thick, tactile color palette. Pink and gold highlights—unexpected colors—are like those often marking the sign of a synesthetic perception.
- 18 Basic forms often occur as bright shapes on a dark background, phosphenes which have been documented as often seen by genuine synesthetes. The bright, central, radiating suns in Burchfield, Thomson, Van Gogh, Heinrich Hein, and Max Gehlsen belong to Klüver's "form constants" studies. These recur in cloud shapes and auras in work by all the synesthetic artists we featured in our exhibition. Many seem to be "touched" by calligraphy and confusing motion/images. Boundaries between "reality" and shadows, dream and wakefulness, are frequently imprecise. This blurring is emphasized by shifting, water and reflections, and varying perspectives.
- 19 Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992), György Ligeti (1923–2006), Libby Larson (b. 1950), Aaron Jay Kernis (b. 1960), Michael Torke (b. 1961), Ben Wolfe (b. 1962), Kendall Briggs; and Eliahu Shoot are among the composers I (and sometimes others) have identified as genuine synesthetes.
- 20 Synesthetic visual art parallels synesthetic composer Olivier Messiaen's music, which stands on the border between tonal, traditional music and dissonant, "new" sounds. A sense of complexity and newness characterizes this art. But it is never new for newness sake. Not one of these artists seems to fear trying unorthodox methods. A quality of movement, often a dance-like playfulness, as well as rapidity, urgency, and ecstasy abound in all their work.

- 21 References to the wind, wind harps, and even wind machines (Messiaen) are common. Burchfield and Messiaen personalize bird and insect songs, often assigning alliterative, made-up names to sounds. This specificity of sounds also applies to shapes—often biomorphic ones in Hockney, Smilack, and Kandinsky. The notion of a picture within a picture, or a window opening into another reality is referred to by Hockney, Messiaen, and Smilack. Above all, it is the layering that confirms the joined sensations that characterize synesthetic art.

Figure 5. – Marcia Smilack, *Vibrato Bridge*, 2004.



- 22 A recent performance of Messiaen's *Des Canyons aux Étoiles* highlighted some of these commonalities, which apply to visual art as well as to musical composition.
- 23 In this piece, the composer musically illustrates his enchantment with the sights and sounds of Utah's Bryce Canyon. Especially intrigued by birdsong, he also describes the wind and the colors of the landscape. It is no coincidence that Van Gogh, Kandinsky, Charles Burchfield, Tom Thomson, David Hockney, Joan Mitchell, Marcia Smilack, and Carol Steen—also respond ecstatically in their art to the

colors, sounds, depths, and complexity of nature. In order to convey the canyon's impact, Messiaen makes use of anomalous musical techniques, including instruments played in a highly unconventional manner. For example, the French horn uses flutter tonguing, arpeggios, and pitch blending; the trumpet wails, making shrill sounds; percussion and special machines evoke wind; the piano uses the entire range of the keyboard to produce overtones that sing out after the notes have been played.

- 24 Likewise, synesthetic visual artists often use unusual techniques and perspectives. Painter Carol Steen expresses her artistic vision by applying oil paint with her fingers; Marcia Smilack photographs reflections upside down when she “hears them”, and Hockney creates opera sets according to the sound that informs his colors. Kandinsky claimed to have discovered abstraction upon seeing one of his works wrong side up. Synesthetes invariably manifest a multi-layered, complex way of looking at and interpreting things. In synesthetic art, both paintings and music exploit unexpected and startling rhythms.
- 25 None of these attributes alone is unique to synesthetes. However, the sheer number of commonalities screams out to be noticed. The more one looks, the more the evidence mounts. This essay does not definitively prove that all the artists included here are genuine synesthetes. But it lays the foundation for establishing a typology that defines the many common attributes that bind synesthetes together as a group. Messiaen, in *From the Canyon to the Stars*, employs an aesthetic and perceptual vocabulary that would seem entirely familiar to all synesthetic artists. He described Bryce Canyon as

...a landscape of... fantastic shapes...castles, towers, dungeons... turrets, bridges, windows... colours... all sorts of reds: red-violet, rose, dark red carmine, scarlet red, all possible varieties of red... the smell of sage. And then...the birds...the western tanager... which is red and yellow, with a lovely voice, very flute-like... Then there's a very large...blue grouse, which goes 'wuh, wuh, wuh, a strange deep sound... colours are very important to me because I have a gift—it's not my fault—whenever I hear music or even if I read music, I see colours. They correspond to the sounds, rapid colours which turn, mix, combine, and move with the sounds... They are always changing... (Watts & Messiaen, 1979, p. 4)

- 26 Asked if he knew the art of Kandinsky, Messiaen replied that he is one of his favorite artists.

Investigation on Joyce Yang's synesthetic case

- 27 Among performing musicians, Itzak Perlman (b. 1945), Sir Andras Schiff (b. 1953), Joyce Yang, 2005 Van Cliburn Competition silver medalist (youngest ever. b. 1986), and a score of lesser-known artists have discussed their synesthesia in recent years.

- 28 Since I know Joyce Yang the best, and she has shared her thoughts about synesthesia with me extensively, I shall include some of these perceptions here:³

- 29 She has perfect pitch.

- 30 She has colored days of the week: They are consistent. (This is one of the most common form of shared synesthesia, although the colors associated with the days of the week are idiosyncratic).

- 31 For Yang:

- Monday is red.
- Tuesday is colorless.
- Wednesday is lime yellow.
- Thursday is boring, like the color of a tree trunk.
- Friday is blue.
- Saturday is neutral, a kind of light gray.
- Sunday is black.

- 32 Yang uses her synesthesia to “order” a program she plays; if she can choose the recital program, she tries to include the entire spectrum (every hue).

- 33 She describes a D major chord as having a color, but a piece in D Major has many colors.

- 34 It's like “a country of yellow, but the cities within this country have different colors”.

- 35 “Playing pieces in the same key is like wearing the same color.”

- 36 Lavender for her is Gb Major. Interestingly, it is a different color from F# major, although it sounds the same on the piano. That's because G is Blue for her; (Gb is blue that gets all white and turns purple); but F is Green and F# sounds like a green that "smoked pot" and turns a teal-ish.
- 37 Yang has told me that she sees all the notes she plays.
- 38 From the sound, she would think that Gb smells like lavender.
- 39 Like the days of the week, Yang has colors for most keys:
- A is Red (A# is "strange like a person with 4 arms").
 - B is yellowish (canary), but Bb is golden, like a French horn.
 - C has no color; it is clear "like a glass ball".
 - D is the brightest color. It is yellow, but a different yellow from B; it has to do with sunshine yellow.
 - E is pink; Eb is velvet red, which has to have weight. It possesses formality "like a 16 course prix fixe".
 - F is green, like the Alps in spring; it is organic.
 - G is blue.
- 40 She emphatically stated that nothing is orange; and that she never wears orange. (This parallels Carol Steen's saying that she never sees the color purple; it also corresponds with composer Kendall Briggs' wearing all black because colors possess so many moods and emotions for him).
- 41 She sees forms that move... (like all the synesthetic visual artists I have known).
- 42 She memorizes keys and pieces by color. (Another way many synesthetes use their synesthesia).
- 43 She is bad with numbers, but good with math.
- 44 She has no colors for months of the year. She thinks this is because in Korean (her native language) months are simply numbered and not named).
- 45 She has to see something written. Reading out loud is only sound. Then she can't think about the meaning. To read she must have silence!

- 46 She loves and writes poetry; she struggles over it, and has spent a lot of time on it.
- 47 She loves chamber music, and plays violin too!
- 48 She feels movement. These are some of the consequences of what she imagines visually in her head. A big chord is “2 feet deep”.
- 49 Imagine a well with bottom of the well for Beethoven’s *Sonata Pathétique*. This causes an echo. This is a visceral thing; just preparation and aftermath and scenario... Certain chords surprise her.
- 50 She has personification (another synesthetic commonality): Bartok is hard to memorize, so for her it parallels sounds of insects, frogs, etc.
- 51 “9 bugs with different color hats”—when they appear in cells (like motifs) they are like a jigsaw puzzle. They personify movement for her.
- 52 Bartok—there is NO key! “I draw 2 opaque circles that are moss green. ‘Mist’ is the color I am going for.” But clusters = F, G, G# —“There’s an ‘aha’ moment, and I return to the color of moss green.
- 53 She played Kurtag and Franck with violinist Augustine Hadelich:
- 54 In Kurtag there is no key. “You play when you are at peace with the note.” “It is like looking at a painting through a pinhole.” No applause was allowed between the Kurtag and the Franck. “When you hear the first chord of the Franck, it is like a curtain goes up, and you see the painting for the first time. In a split second, you see everything.”
- 55 Joyce Yang has, in conclusion, many shared synesthetic perceptions with synesthetic visual artists, as well as with other musicians and composers I have interviewed.
- 56 Interestingly, while preparing this essay, I noticed three different articles in the *New York Times* of November 24, 2017, all of which dealt with genuine synesthesia, but not one mentioning the word. The first, titled “Perception Is in the Eye (and Nose) of the Beholder” reviews the current show at the American Museum of Natural History, called “The Senses”. The second was a rave review of the David Hockney exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, titled “A (Full) Life in Painting”. But apparently the author did not find it

necessary to include a mention of Hockney's synesthesia in this full life. The third article, "Part Play, Part Film and (Sniff) Partly Perfumed", reviews a recent play that the director, Cyril Teste, hopes will "draw people in by their noses, rather than their eyes". I mention these to point out that writers and reviewers are still appallingly ignorant of the concept of synesthesia.

- 57 To return to my first point, the difference between metaphorical and genuine synesthesia: Paul Klee's paintings, though musical—and extremely important—are too contrived and carefully planned-out to constitute genuine synesthesia.
- 58 Kandinsky, on the other hand, said he did not want to paint music (indicating to me that he did not have the choice, or make the distinction). His voluminous writings include many statements that seem genuinely synesthetic. We are now quite certain that Charles Burchfield was synesthetic. And I am nearly positive that Vincent van Gogh was—but that is a story for another essay.

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NOTES

1 I am indebted to Henry Keazor for information about Anschutz. Please see Dr. M. Haverkamp, Köln, “Visualisation of Synaesthetic Experience during the Early 20th Century – An Analytic Approach”, presented at the International Conference on Synaesthesia, Medizinische Hochschule Hannover, March 2003 for further information and see figures in Carol Steen’s essay in this catalogue.

2 All quotes are from J. Benjamin Townsend (1993).

3 All quotes are taken directly from interviews with J. Yang.

ABSTRACTS

English

This essay focuses on the phenomenon of synesthesia. In an attempt to differentiate between genuine synesthesia and metaphorical synesthesia, I have searched for shared traits among synesthetic visual artists, as well as among composers and performing musicians. The field of synesthesia has been rife with misunderstandings. Though ever increasing numbers of exhibitions, books, and articles have used the title or subtitle, “Synesthesia in art and/or music”, few of these adequately define synesthesia. The major cause of the problem is that art and music historians and curators, as well as artists and composers themselves, have confused the desire to inter-mingle various art forms with the phenomenon of genuine synesthesia. I show the existence of recurrent patterns of artistic response to synesthetic experience, the evidence of shared characteristics, by taking the examples of Carol Steen, Marcia Smilack, Joan Mitchell, David Hockney, Messiaen. I also present the results of my investigation on the synesthetic perceptions of the pianist Joyce Yang.

Français

Cet essai porte sur le phénomène de la synesthésie. Pour bien différencier synesthésie authentique et synesthésie métaphorique, j’ai recherché des traits communs chez les artistes visuels synesthètes, ainsi que chez les compositeurs et les musiciens interprètes. Le champ de la synesthésie a été envahi par des malentendus. Bien que de plus en plus d’expositions, de livres et d’articles utilisent le titre ou le sous-titre « Synesthésie dans l’art et/ou la musique », peu d’entre eux définissent adéquatement la synesthésie. La principale cause du problème est que les historiens et les conser-

vateurs d'art et de musique, ainsi que les artistes et les compositeurs eux-mêmes, ont confondu le désir d'entremêler diverses formes d'art avec le phénomène de la véritable synesthésie. Je montre l'existence de modèles récurrents de réponse artistique à l'expérience synesthésique, l'évidence de caractéristiques partagées, en prenant les exemples de Carol Steen, Marcia Smilack, Joan Mitchell, David Hockney, Messiaen. Je présente également les résultats de ma recherche sur les perceptions synesthétiques de la pianiste Joyce Yang.

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Mots-clés

synesthésie, Carol Steen, David Hockney, Messiaen, Joan Mitchell, Marcia Smilack, Heinrich Klüver, Joyce Yang

Keywords

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AUTHOR

Greta Berman

Juilliard School of Music, New York, NY